

# Finding the Balance



## COMMENTARY

### [1] DRIVING FORCE

It's hard to make blanket statements about why Jews do what they do. Not all Jews might agree. I feel like I'm ignoring a large and important part of the Jewish population's motivation for keeping Kosher. Laws of Kashrut are seen as 'super-rational' commandments, meaning we can't know why we do them, but we should trust G-d and follow them. However, I'm not comfortable telling a child to 'just do it' because G-d says so.

### [2] SHOULD BE

It's important to be careful with 'should' statements. How can I say this without sounding preachy? I could say, 'well, this is how I do it...'

### [3] NOT ENOUGH

Why not? As I stated before, some part of the Jewish population happily accepts G-d's commandments on face value. Or, perhaps the connectedness piece is enough. Maybe the connectedness has meaning.

### [4] BIG IDEA

Again, many people might disagree. I read the law to not cook a kid in its mother's milk was in response to what the Syrians were doing. Should I bring in a critical historical view? Would children be interested in learning about the historical reasons for keeping kosher?

The curious child asks:

## What makes me a Jew?

What makes this community Jewish? Why do we rest on Shabbat? Why do we eat certain foods and not eat certain foods? What are the reasons behind keeping kosher? As an educator, I have a profound respect for the intellect that drives this curiosity. This child is asking "why do we do what we do?"

I would emphasize to this child that the driving force behind our Jewish rituals [1]—keeping kosher, honoring Shabbat, and others — should be [2] a combination of connectedness and personal meaning. The Jew feels connected to his community, knowing that Jews around the world are motivated by the same laws, and are compelled to the same acts of thinking about their food and the laws of kosher. It is something that binds Jews together. Some Jews, myself included, feel [strongly] connected to this tradition that their ancestors have done for thousands of years.

Of course, keeping kosher as a matter of following group behavior is not enough [3]. Each Jew must decide what is

personally meaningful for him. Ask yourself: Do you agree with the big ideas behind the laws of Kashrut? Does your level of Kashrut work for you? Why and how someone keeps kosher should be in keeping with Kaplan's belief that rituals/observances should not be presented as solely "do what works for you," nor should it be "do this for the sake of Jewish continuity." There must be a balance of connectedness and personal fulfillment, which arises out of honestly examining these rituals. A child that wants to honestly examine the rituals and beliefs of her community, to me, is setting off on a path to finding this balance.

Another way to think about Kashrut, and especially Shabbat observance, is by thinking about the big ideas behind them. To me, the big idea behind keeping Kosher is being aware of the nourishment that is going into our bodies. [4] Another big idea behind keeping kosher is having compassion for animals; having respect for the living being that is being killed to provide you with

nourishment. Jewish values [5] call on us to think about what is going into our bodies and have respect for animals that are being killed for nourishment.

Shabbat, likewise, draws from the idea of separating Shabbat from the other days of the week as day of rest. Shabbat is one of Judaism's highest values (from Miriam's stance paper), and each family and individual might be encouraged to "find ways to make it personally meaningful and special." (Miriam Benowitz) To the child inquiring about why we honor Shabbat as a special day, I would offer that it is important to set apart some time for rest and respite, and that Judaism offers a time-tested tradition to do just that [6].

How should this stance inform my practice as a Jewish educator and a school's attitude toward Kashrut and Shabbat observance? I think it's important to infuse an attitude of respect and curiosity in children. They should respect one another for informed decisions that they make about Kashrut and Shabbat observance, and they should be curious to explore these topics within their own intellect.

In practical terms, I would ask parents not to send their children with non-Kosher foods [7] to school, in order that every child and his family feel comfortable in their own choices concerning Kashrut. I would engage the

students in a conversation about different choices when it comes to food. There are more choices than Kosher or non-Kosher. There is also the issue of humane treatment of animals, healthy food choices, and gratitude for the bounty of the Earth [8]. I would thus encourage students to recite the blessings over food, and engage in a conversation about what they mean and why we say them.

In order to honor each child's (or his family's) Shabbat observance, I would not assign writing assignments during the weekend, or any other assignment that might jeopardize honoring Shabbat in any way. I would ask parents to schedule children's birthday parties and other events on days other than Friday and Saturday.

As an educator, I wish to create an avenue for children to learn about Jewish values and practices, and give them the space to explore, examine and engage in these practices [9]. If a child asked me if I think all Jews should keep kosher and honor Shabbat, I would explain to that child why I like keeping kosher, and why it's special to me. I would reiterate the big ideas behind separating Shabbat as a day of rest. I would remind the child that Jews around the world do these practices, and that part of what makes us all connected. We have shared goals and shared

traditions. I don't think that all Jews need to keep kosher or honor Shabbat, but I hope that all Jews respect and understand why someone else would choose to do so.

#### [5] JEWISH VALUES

This is completely unsubstantiated. This explanation should be better introduced as a compilation of my own thoughts and motivations for keeping kosher. However, there is value in separating out what the child could be asking: What reasons are there for people *today* keeping kosher? and What are the reasons that Kosher laws are in the Torah? Contemporary Jewish values do emphasize being aware of what goes into our bodies. Rabbi Kalman Packouz writes in "Why Kosher?" (<http://www.aish.com/jl/m/mm/48945306.html>) that there are some good reasons for today's Jews to keep Kosher, including hygienic, moral, national, mystical and discipline. "You are what you eat," Rabbi Packouz writes, "Kosher is G-d's diet for spirituality." He also writes that being disciplined in what we eat can spill over to other areas of our lives.

#### [6] TIME-TESTED TRADITION

Somehow this statement about Shabbat comes across in a non-obnoxious way. I think it's safer and less controversial to tell Jewish families that there are good reasons and great benefits to honoring Shabbat in some way, rather than telling them the same thing about keeping Kosher. I would say that a lot of Jewish families do not keep Kosher because they see the original reasons (from Biblical times) as out-dated and no longer necessary. Whereas the need for not working ourselves like slaves is much more approachable.

[7]

**NON-KOSHER FOODS**

I struggled with this. Although I think it's important and understandable for a day school to have this policy, I think it's equally important to send the message home that there are reasons for the policy. The message is not: 'Keeping Kosher is better, and if you want to be a better Jew, you should keep Kosher.' Rather, the message is: 'We want families to engage in a conversation about keeping Kosher, and explore this aspect of our Jewish tradition.' I think that some parents will not get this message. This policy must be supported by a classroom and parent conversation about acceptance within our Jewish tradition, and inclusivity.

[8]

**OTHER ISSUES**

As I already addressed, these are personal views, but I would love to tie our traditions over food (Kashrut and blessings) to showing gratitude for the bounty of the Earth, and could use harvest holidays as a point to connection.

[9]

**SPACE TO EXPLORE**

This is the main point of the stance paper. How do I structurally include this big idea in the classroom?

**CRITIQUE**

This stance paper lacks the etiquette and diplomacy I was going for. I looked to Miriam Benowitz' stance paper on Kashrut and Shabbat policies in schools, but did not manage to capture the essence of her stance. I want schools to take a position. In my paper, there are two divergent messages: that keeping Kosher and Shabbat are a matter of personal preference, and which families are encouraged to explore these traditions, what they end up choosing is perfectly fine. On the other hand, I am suggesting that parents don't send non-Kosher foods to the school or hold birthday parties on Shabbat. What this paper lacks is emphasizing the centrality of these traditions in Judaism. To ignore these traditions would be a deficit in the Jewish home. That is my personal belief, but I'm also a firm believer in 'live and let live.' I'm uncomfortable suggesting to families that there is something wrong with what they have chosen for their lives.

On the other hand, how much can a classroom teacher influence a family's view on Kashrut or Shabbat observance? Likely, these decisions have been made well before the child enters my classroom. What are my roles, then? Have I focused on irrelevant issues? Would my efforts better serve in the capacity of instilling these big ideas I talk about? Rather than telling children and families that keeping Kosher can be connected with being aware of the nourishment we consume, why not focus lessons around health and nutrition, and integrate Kashrut into it? That would be a real test of whether modern-day reasons for keeping Kosher really do have any connection to these big ideas. Or I could teach Jewish values such as showing compassion for animals, and talk about Kosher slaughtering.

Writing this stance paper and critique has been a challenge for me. There is a fine and delicate line between injecting personal belief and taking a strong stand. On one hand, teachers should strive to be objective, open and non-judgmental to all students and families. On the other hand, teachers should be morally strong and should hold opinions about moral issues, Jewish issues and more. If I were boil this stance paper down to one sentence in response to: 'What is your stance on Kosher and Shabbat observance?' I would say this:

**As an educator, I wish to create an avenue for children and families to learn about Jewish values and practices, such as Kosher and Shabbat observance, and give them the space to explore, examine and engage in these practices.**